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Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Samuel F.B. Morse

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

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[The American Cyclopædia]

MORSE,

Samuel Finley Breese, an American artist and inventor, born in Charlestown, Mass., April 27, 1791, died in New York, April 2, 1872. He graduated at Yale college in 1810, and went to England with Washington Allston in 1811 to study painting under his tuition and that of Benjamin West. In 1813 he received the gold medal of the Adelphi society of arts for an original model of a "Dying Hercules," his first attempt at sculpture. He returned to the United States in 1815, practised his profession in Boston and in Charleston, S. C., and removed to New York in 1822. In 1824–'5, in connection with other artists, he organized a drawing association, which resulted in the establishment in 1826 of the "National Academy of Design." Morse was chosen its first president, and was continued in that office for 16 years. In 1829 he visited Europe a second time to complete his studies in art, residing for more than three years in the principal cities of the continent. During his absence abroad he was elected professor of the literature of the arts of design in the university of the city of New York; and in 1835 he delivered a course of lectures before that institution on the affinity of those arts. While in college Mr. Morse had paid special attention to chemistry and natural philosophy; and these sciences at length became a dominant pursuit with him. In 1826–'7 Prof. J. Freeman Dana had been a colleague lecturer in the city of New York with Mr. Morse at the Athenæum, the former lecturing upon electro-magnetism and the latter upon the fine arts. They were intimate friends, and in their conversations the subject of electro-magnetism was made familiar to the mind of Morse. The electro-magnet on Sturgeon's principle (the first ever shown in the United States) was exhibited and explained in Dana's lectures, and at a later date, by gift of Prof. Torrey, came into Morse's possession. Dana even then suggested by his spiral volute coil the electro-magnet of the present day; this was the magnet in use when Morse returned from Europe, and it is now used in every Morse telegraph throughout both hemispheres. He embarked in the autumn of 1832 at Havre on board the packet ship Sully; and in a casual conversation with some of the passengers on the then recent discovery in France of the means of obtaining the electric spark from the magnet, showing the identity or relation of electricity and magnetism, Morse's mind conceived not merely the idea of an electric telegraph, but of an electro-magnetic and chemical recording telegraph, substantially and essentially as it now exists. The testimony to the paternity of the idea in Morse's mind and to his acts and drawings on board the ship is ample. His own testimony is corroborated by all the passengers (with a single exception) who testified with him before the courts, and was considered conclusive by the judges; and the year 1832 is therefore fixed as the date of Morse's conception, and realization also, so far as drawings could embody the conception, of the telegraph system which now bears his name. A part of the apparatus was constructed in New York before the close of 1832, but circumstances prevented its completion before 1835, when he put up a half mile of wire in coils around a room and exhibited a telegraph in operation. In September, 1837, he exhibited the operation of his system in the university of New York. From the greater publicity of this exhibition, the date of Morse's invention has erroneously been fixed in the autumn of 1837, whereas he operated successfully with the first single instrument in November, 1835. In 1837 he filed his caveat in the patent office in Washington, and asked congress for aid to build an experimental line from that city to Baltimore. The house committee on commerce gave a favorable report, but the session closed without action, and Morse went to Europe in hope of interesting foreign governments in his invention. The result was a refusal to grant him letters patent in England, and the obtaining of a useless *brevet d'invention* in France, and no exclusive privilege in any other country. He returned home to struggle again with scanty means for four years, during which he continued his appeals at Washington. His hope had expired on the last evening of the session of 1842–'3; but in the morning, March 4, he was startled with the announcement that the desired aid of congress had been obtained in the midnight hour of the expiring session, and $30,000 placed at his disposal for his experimental essay between Washington and Baltimore. In 1844 the work was completed, and demonstrated to the world the practicability and the utility of the Morse system of electro-magnetic telegraphs. Violations of his patents and the assumption of his rights by rival companies involved him in a long series of lawsuits; but these were eventually decided in his favor, and he reaped the benefits to which his invention entitled him. It is doubtful if any American ever before received so many marks of distinction. In 1846 Yale college conferred on him the degree of LL. D.; and in 1848 he received the decoration of the *Nishan Iftikar* in diamonds from the sultan of Turkey. Gold medals of scientific merit were awarded him by the king of Prussia, the king of Würtemberg, and the emperor of Austria. In 1856 he received from the emperor of the French the cross of chevalier of the legion of honor; in 1857 from the king of Denmark the cross of knight commander of the first class of the Danebrog; in 1858 from the queen of Spain the cross of knight commander of the order of Isabella the Catholic; from the king of Italy the cross of the order of SS. Maurice and Lazarus, and from

Congress and Samuel Morse

By HENRY OLNEY

Samuel F. B. Morse, Inventor and Painter, In His Old Age

THE MONTH OF MARCH should be associated with thoughts of the telegraph, one of science's greatest boons to humanity.

It was in March, 1843, that Congress finally passed a bill appropriating $30,000 to be used by Prof. Samuel F. B. Morse in building an experimental telegraph line at the National Capital. Morse, it may be said, in passing, was a painter of distinction as well as a scientist.

Seldom, indeed has a man gone through more disappointments, trials, sorrows and hardships in trying to give to his country what was to be one of the greatest miracles and business and social revolutionizers of all time. He not only lost all financially, but through sneers and ridicule well-night suffered a broken heart.

After cooling his heels in the outer halls of Congress for half a dozen years, and being pointed out as a "crank" and an eccentric individual, Morse was finally rewarded with success. The surprise was so great that he was almost overcome.

March 3, 1843, was the last day of Congress. All day long and for part of the evening a tall thin man, prematurely aged, with a sad, disappointed face, could be seen sitting in the gallery of the Senate. He was perhaps the loneliest man in Washington, and he was Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph, patiently waiting to see what action would be taken on his bill.

Night came. The negro janitors bustled around and lighted the numerous oil lamps. Friends, kind-hearted souls, came to the man who was keeping this watchful and lonesome vigil and assured him that there were so many bills ahead of his that it would be physically impossible to reach it.

With his head sunk on his breast, the old man slowly made his way to his little boarding house some blocks from the Capitol. His heart was heavy. His entire capital was less than a dollar. What would he do? How could he provide bread for his motherless children for another year until a new Congress should convene? Finally, with a prayer on his lips, he fell asleep from pure physical exhaustion.

Next morning while Morse was partaking of a frugal breakfast there was an excited ringing of the door bell. Word came that a young lady was eager to see him and was waiting for him in the parlor. It was Miss Annie Ellsworth, daughter of the Commissioner of Patents.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Morse! I have come to congratulate you."

"Indeed, for what?"

"On the passage of your bill."

"Oh, no, my young friend, you are mistaken, I was in the Senate Chamber until after the lamps were lighted, and my senatorial friends assured me there was no chance for me."

"But it is you that are mistaken,!" she laughingly replied.

"Father was there at the adjournment at midnight, and saw President Tyler put his name to your bill; and I asked father if I might come and tell you and he gave me permission. Am I the first to tell you?"

The news was such a shock that for a time the old man could not speak. It is a fair assumption that he wanted more than anything to cry. He finally recovered control, and said:

"Yes, Annie, you are the first to tell me, and now I am going to make a promise. The first despatch on the completed line from Washington to Baltimore shall be yours."

"All right, Mr. Morse, I shall hold you to your promise."

The bill providing for this first telegraph line in this republic read as follows:

"Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress assembled, that the sum of thirty thousand dollars be, and is hereby appropriated, out of any moneys in the treasury not otherwise appropriated, for testing the capacity and usefulness of the system of electro-magnetic telegraphs invented by Samuel F. B. Morse, of New York, for the use of the Government of the United States, by constructing a line of said electro-magnetic telegraphs, under the superintendence of Professor Samuel F. B. Morse, of such length and between such points as shall fully test its practicability and utility; and that the same shall be expended under the direction of the Postmaster General, upon the application of said Morse.

"Section 2. And be it further enacted, that the Postmaster General be, and he is hereby, authorized to pay, out of the aforementioned thirty thousand dollars, to the said Samuel F. B. Morse, and the persons employed under him, such sums of money as he may deem to be a fair compensation for the services of the said Samuel F. B. Morse and the persons employed under him, in constructing and in superintending the construction of the said line of telegraphs authorized by this bill."

IT IS interesting to note the view, in that early day, taken by the members of the Committee on Commerce on the future possibilities of telegraphy. Congressman Charles G. Ferris, of New York, in presenting a favorable report of the committee, said.

"Its capability of speedily transmitting intelligence to great distances, for national defense, and for other purposes, where celerity is desirable, is decidedly superior to any of the ordinary modes of communication in use. By it, the first warning of approaching danger, and the appearance of hostile fleets and armies on our coasts and borders, may be announced simultaneously at the most distant points of our widely-extended empire, thus affording time and opportunity for concentrating the military force of the country, for facilitating military and naval movements, and for transmitting orders suitable to the emergency.

"In the commercial and social affairs of the community, occasions frequently arise in which the speedy transmissions of intelligence may be of the highest importance for the regulation of business transactions, and in relieving the anxious solicitude of friends, as to the health and condition of those in whose fortunes they feel an interest."

Morse, happy and ambitious.

(*See CONGRESS, page 30*)

began building the line to Baltimore. On May 24, 1884 1844, everything was completed and ready for business. It was a great day for America, Morse invited a number of guests to witness the ceremony of sending the first telegram in history. Among these guests was Alice Key, daughter of Francis Scott Key, author of the "Star Spangled Banner." True to his promise made the previous year, Annie Ellsworth was guest of honor and to her was accorded the privilege of writing the first telegram. She selected a portion of the 23d verse of the 23d chapter of Numbers—"What hath God wrought?"

The message was sent to Baltimore, and immediately repeated back to Washington, to the great astonishment of the onlookers.

It was as great a sensation at that time as were later on the telephone, talking-machine, moving picture, airplane and radio.

National Republic